Providing Travel Health Information on the World Wide Web

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The traveling public needs ready access to information on the health hazards they may face while traveling abroad. Travel Medicine clinics can provide pre-travel counseling and the immunizations and medications needed to prevent illness, but these services may not be readily available outside major urban areas. Primary care physicians are often not prepared or are unwilling to offer travelers such services. Some travelers may not be aware of the potential risks they face and therefore do not seek out medical advice. This may be especially true of business travelers who may depart on short notice and who frequently make their own travel arrangements.

Many individuals who travel now have access to the Internet through on-line services or the workplace. We reasoned that the World Wide Web (WWW) could provide an ideal medium through which to educate those travelers who otherwise may never be informed of what they should do to stay healthy while traveling abroad.

The Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) International Travelers Clinic is a major provider of travel medicine services. A computer program that we developed in 1984 called TRAVAX is utilized in the clinic to ensure that all required and recommended vaccinations are offered. This program utilizes an expert system approach to provide itinerary specific information and is now commercially available. While this system is optimal for clinic use, we desired to provide more generic information that would be of interest to both the traveling public and to physicians who care for travelers.

SYSTEM DESCRIPTION

We developed the MCW International Travelers Clinic Travel Health Information server with the URL address:

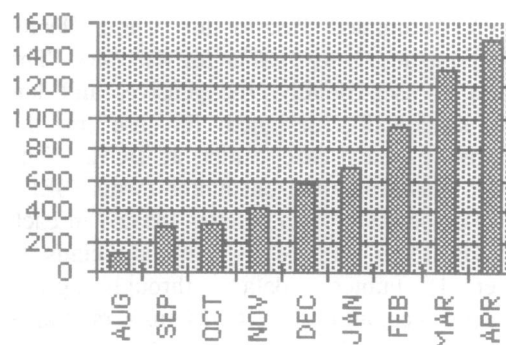http://www.intmed.mcw.edu/travel.html

Information is available through a series of 23 html documents on travel health concerns, diseases, immunizations, environmental hazards, and preventive measures. A list of travel medicine providers associated with the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH) is provided. Also included are hypertext links to other WWW travel information sources such as the U.S. State Department Travel Advisories (through St. Olaf College).

The html documents were prepared using a plain text editor for the Macintosh (SimpleText). The server currently runs under WebSTAR™ software on a Macintosh LCII linked via a localtalk network through a Cayman Gatorbox router to the MCW ethernet that is in turn connected to the Internet.

SYSTEM USAGE

Usage has been tracked utilizing WebStat. Since coming on-line in August 1994, there has been a steady increase in system utilization with over 1,500 home page accesses per month from outside our own institution as of April 1995:

Users from more than 40 countries have accessed over 4,500 html documents. The most frequently viewed documents have been: 1) preparing a travel medicine kit (23%) and 2) travel risk overview (19%).

We expect utilization to increase further as more WWW indexes and other travel or medical related sites add hypertext pointers to our service.

SUMMARY

This brief report documents the successful implementation of a WWW based travel health information service and illustrates the feasibility of providing consumer health information over the Internet. The demand for such services should increase as more consumers gain Internet access.